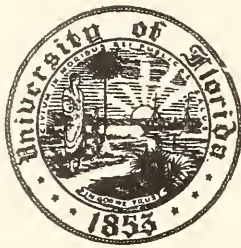



821.4
D799Ye
c.2

UNIVERSITY
OF FLORIDA
LIBRARIES





Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2011 with funding from
LYRASIS Members and Sloan Foundation

<http://www.archive.org/details/johndryden00smit>

JOHN DRYDEN

THE POET

THE DRAMATIST

THE CRITIC

Three Essays by T. S. ELIOT

NEW YORK

TERENCE & ELSA HOLLIDAY

1932

COPYRIGHT 1932 BY T. S. ELIOT

WALPOLE PRINTING OFFICE, NEW ROCHELLE

DRYDEN THE POET

English
HUMANITIES ROOM

25-60 Fla Bk. store

Dryden the Poet



DRYDEN's position in English literature is unique. Far below Shakespeare, and even below Milton, as we must put him, he yet has, just by reason of his precise degree of inferiority, a kind of importance which neither Shakespeare nor Milton has—the importance of his *influence*. It is this nice question of influence that I wish to investigate first, in relation to what I may call the “literary dictator,” that is, in our history, Ben Jonson, Dryden, Samuel Johnson and in his way, Coleridge. Are we to say that poets like Shakespeare and Milton were without influence? Certainly not, but “influence,” in the sense in which we can cope with the term, is something more limited. The disproportion between Shakespeare and his immediate followers, among the dramatists, is so great that the influence of Shakespeare is a trifling

thing in comparison with Shakespeare himself;
John and as for Milton, that was so peculiar a genius
Dryden that although he had plenty of mimics during
the eighteenth century, he can hardly be said to
have any followers. For "influence," as Dryden
had influence, a poet must not be so great as to
overshadow all followers. Dryden was followed
by Pope, and a century later, by Samuel John-
son; both men of great original genius, who
developed the medium left them by Dryden, in
ways which cast honour both on them and on
him. It should seem then no paradox to say that
Dryden was the great influence upon English
verse that he was, because he was *not* too great
to have any influence at all. He was neither the
consummate poet of earlier times, nor the eccen-
tric poet of later. He was happy both in his
predecessors and in his successors. A hundred
years is a long time for the stamp of one man
to remain upon a literature; poets' influence and
reputation cannot last so long in our days; and
6 that makes Dryden a central, a typical figure

in English letters. He is in himself the Malherbe, the Boileau, the Corneille and almost the Molière *The Poet* (almost, because Congreve refined and surpassed him in comedy) of the seventeenth century in England; and to him, as much as to any individual, we owe our civilisation.

As a figure, there is nothing picturesque about the man John Dryden. He came of a small country family like hundreds of others; he had, for a man of his origins, no great worldly advantages; he married a lady of superior rank, who brought him no exceptional advantage either, and apparently little domestic happiness. He was an ordinary seeming, florid countryman, whose manners, according to the next and more refined generation, were not of the most polished. We do not know whether it was by the brilliance of his conversation that he was the great figure of Wills's Coffee House for all the hours that he passed there every day; but there he was, admired by minor men of letters, and courted by bluestocking noblemen. If not be 7

cause of his powers of talk, in an age when men
John talked and drank for more hours a day than
Dryden they can afford to do now, and when they
wrote, wrote at higher speed than we can, then
it was because they all recognised that Dryden
could do everything that they would have liked
to do, and because what he wrote did not ex-
ceed the scope of their comprehension. I can-
not imagine Shakespeare cutting such a figure
in a tavern or coffee-house; that solitary person
surely had too much in his head which his tap-
room companions could not understand; the
predecessor of Dryden in this role is, of course,
Ben Jonson. But although of Jonson we have
so few personal remains, yet the notes and the
anecdotes which we have give us at least the
illusion of as definite a character as that of Dr.
Samuel Johnson. We remember the story of
Ben Jonson, that when he returned to the An-
glican fold after his temporary defection to
Rome, he showed his enthusiasm by seizing the
8 chalice, at his first communion, and draining

it to the last drop. We can never see Dryden so clearly; yet his age was in accord that he expressed each man better than any man could express himself. *The Poet*

Being so completely representative, Dryden not only formed the mould for the next age, but himself derived very clearly from the last. In his work there is nothing unexpected, no new element with unknown properties. As a poet, Dryden came to resolve the contradictions of the previous period, and select from it the styles which were capable of development. His first verse, though clever enough of its kind to earn ready commendations, is distinctly bad. It is encumbered with all the late metaphysical conceits which he was himself to destroy. Cleveland and Benlowes are lightfooted by comparison; for they traced their patterns with conviction; and of the early verses of Dryden one can only say that they are by a man doing his best to talk an idiom alien to him: but for sudden flashes of wit and sense here and there, one

would say that their author could never be a poet. It used to be thought that the poetic styles of Dryden and Pope were artificial. One has only to compare them with the style of Dryden's immediate predecessor, Abraham Cowley, to prove the contrary. Dryden became a great poet because he could *not* write an artificial style; because it was intolerable to him; because he had that uncorruptible sincerity of word which at all times distinguishes the good writer from the bad, and at critical times such as his, distinguishes the great writer from the little one. What Dryden did in fact was to reform the language, and devise a natural, conversational style of speech in verse in place of an artificial and decadent one.

Too much can still be made, I think, of Dryden's debt to Waller and Denham, and to his contemporary Oldham. Oldham, certainly, is very near to him; Oldham is rough and unpolished, but occasionally in his "rugged line" there breaks out a vigour not unlike Dryden's.

His satires are still readable. But to Waller and Denham, as practitioners of the heroic couplet, *The Poet* his debt can be exaggerated. As Pope says, "Waller was smooth," indeed, but his smoothness is feebleness, compared to anything accomplished by Dryden or Pope himself: the smoothness of an ambling pad-pony compared to that of a fiery horse with an expert rider. Waller mostly, and Denham except in one passage, send us to sleep; and Dryden never allows us to do that. I think that Dryden owes more to his reaction against the artifices of the late metaphysical verse, than to any sedulous study of Waller. For the content of his couplet, the sensibility which informs it, is as different from that of Waller as well could be.

It is not irrelevant to compare the operation of Dryden with that of Donne. Donne likewise was a reformer of the language. This is not so immediately apparent in Donne's case, for his career is overlapped by the Elizabethan dramatists, who were still, after Shakespeare, explor- z z

ing the possibilities of dramatic blank verse.

John But consider that Shakespearean blank verse was
Dryden soon to expire with the set phrases of Shirley and others, that it had nearly gone its course, and consider what the lyric verse of Shakespeare's time was. It was essentially verse for music; therefore its intellectual content and its range of emotion were restricted. The songs of Shakespeare gain a great deal—perhaps this has not been enough remarked—by their dramatic position in the plays: a song like “full fathom five” is suffused by the meaning and feeling of the passage in which it occurs; the songs of Shakespeare are not interludes or interruptions, but part of the structure of the plays in which they occur. Observing this attribute, we can say that for lyric verse there was very little future, had it not been for Donne. Donne did away with all the stage properties of the ordinary lyric verse of the Elizabethans; he introduced into lyric verse a style of conversation, of direct natural speech; and this was a revolution compar-

able to the development of blank verse into a conversational medium, from Kyd to the mature Shakespeare. And by this innovation Donne gave to the Caroline poets a vehicle which they would hardly have been able to devise for themselves.

*The
Poet*

By the time when Dryden began to write, the vigour of the style initiated by Donne had quite gone: the natural had become the artificial. For there is not, in verse, any wholly objective distinction between the natural and the artificial style. Whether a style is natural is whether it is natural to the man who writes it. It is harder to be natural than to be artificial, it requires a great deal more work, and is painful and unpleasant, because sincerity is always painful and unpleasant. Well, Dryden did the work, and experienced no doubt the pain and unpleasantness, and he restored English verse to the condition of speech.

Now when we say "conversational," or the quality of the spoken language in verse, we

John
Dryden

are inclined to limit it to certain kinds of conversation, perhaps more particularly of an intimate nature; so it is easier for us to perceive this naturalness in Donne than in Dryden. But we have to consider what are the essentials of good speech. At no time, I know, are the written language and the spoken language identical. Obviously, they cannot be: if we talked extempore exactly as we write, no one would listen, and if we wrote exactly as we talk, no one would read. But speech can never divorce itself, beyond some point, from the written word, without damage to itself; and writing can never beyond some point alienate itself from speech, without self-destruction. Now Dryden's couplets may not seem at first sight to echo our own way of speech. That may be partly because the standards of good English in conversation were higher then, and partly because the spoken word, in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, meant much more *public* speech than it does to us; it meant oratory and eloquence.

True, thanks to the radio, we more often listen to public oratory than we did a few years ago. But we hardly expect the sublime; we may prefer the chatty, and if any of our acquaintance, in private company, holds forth and harangues at length, we are apt to qualify him as a bore. But, in the time of Dryden, speech was rather speech in public than in private; and Dryden helped to form a language for generations which were prepared to speak, and to listen, in public. *The Poet*

There are of course three main divisions of Dryden's verse, apart from the verse of the heroic plays: the satires, the songs, and the translations. Now one of the good offices of Dryden in his satires is this: to show us that if verse should not stray too far from the customs of speech, so also it should not abandon too much the uses of prose. Everyone knows the verses of *Mac Flecknoe* and the more varied if less sustained satire of *Absalom and Achitophel*; I should like here to mention rather those two pieces 15

of sustained reasoning in verse, *Religio Laici*
John and *The Hind and the Panther*. Here are two
Dryden poems which could no more have been written
in the eighteenth century than in the nineteenth,
for they are poems of religious controversy.
Other poets, before Dryden, had, in divers fash-
ions, philosophised in verse: Chapman, and Sir
John Davies, and Donne, in his way, in *The*
Progress of the Soul. But in *The Hind and the*
Panther for the first time and for the last is po-
litical-religious controversy elevated to the
condition of poetry. However one views these
differences now, one cannot but appreciate the
characterisation of the Church of England, un-
der the guise of the Panther, which Dryden
draws, after his conversion to Rome:

Thus, like a creature of a double kind,
In her own labyrinth she lives confined.
To foreign lands no sound of her is come,
Humbly content to be despised at home.
Such is her faith, where good cannot be had,
16 *At least she leaves the refuse of the bad.*

*Nice in her choice of ill, though not of best,
 And least deform'd, because reform'd the least... The
 A real presence all her sons allow, Poet
 And yet 'tis flat idolatry to bow,
 Because the Godhead's there, they know not how...
 What is't those faithful then partake or leave?
 For what is signified and understood,
 Is, by her own confession, flesh and blood.
 Then, by the same acknowledgement, we know
 They take the sign, and take the substance too.
 The lit'ral sense is hard to flesh and blood.
 But nonsense never can be understood.*

This is not, when analysed, convincing theological argument—Dryden was no theologian—but it is first-rate oratorical persuasion; and Dryden was the first man to raise oratory to the dignity of poetry, and to descend with poetry to teach the arts of oratory; and to do any one thing with verse better than anyone else has done it, at the same time that one is the first to attempt it, is no small achievement. But it is not only by biting passages like this that 17

a poem of Dryden's succeeds, but by a perfect
John lifting and lowering of his flight, in a varied
Dryden unity without monotony. Take the beginning
of the earlier and inferior of the two poems,
Religio Laici, the passage attacking the prin-
ciples of deism:

*Dim as the borrowed beams of moon and stars
To lonely, weary, wandering travellers
Is Reason to the soul: and as on high
Those rolling fires discover but the sky,
Not light us here, so Reason's glimmering ray
Was lent, not to assure our doubtful way
But guide us upward to a better day.
And as those nightly tapers disappear
When day's bright lord ascends our hemisphere,
So pale grows Reason at Religion's sight,
So dies, and so dissolves in supernatural light.*

This, if I am not greatly mistaken, is first-
rate poetry not incomparable to Lucretius—of
whom, by the way, Dryden by a few passages
18 proved himself the most worthy translator into

English of any time. And the same vein is repeated, with still greater power, in *The Hind and the Panther*: The Poet

*But, gracious God, how well dost thou provide
For erring judgements an unerring guide!
Thy throne is darkness in the abyss of light,
A blaze of glory that forbids the sight.
O teach me to believe Thee thus concealed,
And search no farther than Thyself revealed;
But her alone for my director take,
Whom Thou hast promised never to forsake!
My thoughtless youth was winged with vain
desires;
My manhood, long mislead by wandering fires,
Followed false lights; and when their glimpse was
gone,
My pride struck out new sparkles of her own.
Such was I, such by nature still I am;
Be Thine the glory, and be mine the shame!*

Anyone who to-day could make such an exact statement in verse of such nobility and elegance, 19

John and with such originality of versification and
Dryden language, might well look down upon his contemporaries. We are very far, here, from the smoothness of Waller or Denham. The surface is equally polished; but the difference is between the smooth surface of a piece of sculpture conceived and finished by a master and the smooth surface of a cake of soap.

I shall have occasion to refer again to Dryden's verse translations, including his translations from Chaucer, in connection with his literary criticism. I will only say here that they are more or less satisfactory, naturally, according to Dryden's sympathy with the original, and that perhaps his translations from Lucretius are the most inspired. All are of the best workmanship. Their importance, however, in considering Dryden's place then and now, is this: that it was by his translations almost as much as by his original poems, that Dryden helped to form our modern English tongue. It is no
20 inconsiderable service to a language, to dem-

onstrate that great poetry of other languages and times can be translated into the speech which we use daily, and remain great poetry. It might be a good thing for the language to-day if living poets would devote more attention to translating poetry from both living languages and dead; for the language at Dryden's time it was of vital assistance. Nor shall I now say much about, or quote from, Dryden's lyrical verse. Whatever we think of the *Song for St. Cecilia's Day* or of *Alexander's Feast* we must remember that in these Dryden perfected a form used with less skill by Cowley, and bequeathed it to Gray, Collins, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Tennyson; and without Dryden the *Intimations of Immortality* could not have been written.

The main point, which I wish to drive home about Dryden is this: that it was Dryden who for the first time, and so far as we are concerned, for all time, established a *normal* English speech, a speech valid for both verse and prose, and imposing its laws which greater poetry than

*The
Poet*

Dryden's might violate, but which no poetry
John since has overthrown. The English language as
Dryden left by Shakespeare, and within much narrower
limits, by Milton, was a language like the club
of Hercules, which no lesser strength could wield;
so I believe that the language after Shakespeare
and Milton could only have deteriorated until
some genius appeared as great as they—or in-
deed, greater than they: for the language would
have been quickly in far worse case than that
in which Shakespeare found it. It was Dryden,
more than any other individual, who formed a
language possible for the mediocrity, and yet
possible for later great writers to do great things
with.

And what Dryden accomplished was no by-
product and no accident. Never was there a
worker more conscious of what he was attempt-
ing. His theories, as we shall see, were all theo-
ries directed to what the poet could *consciously*
attempt. Coleridge, in his writings on poetry,
22 far exceeds the limited flight of Dryden, and

disappears in metaphysic clouds. The theory of Coleridge is partly, certainly, as was that of *The Wordsworth*, a defence of his conscious precepts *Poet* of workmanship; but with Wordsworth, and still more with Coleridge, we can say that their theory does not wholly account for the best of their poetry. In this way, Dryden was a far more *conscious* poet than either; perhaps more conscious than any poet of great eminence since. His essays are his conscious thoughts about the kinds of work he was doing; he uttered no metaphysical speculations, he was no prophet or teacher. I can think of no man in literature whose aims are so exactly fulfilled by his performance; and in the whole vineyard no labourer who more deserved his hire.

So I think now that we can understand a little better why John Dryden, of whose personality we know little, except to know that there was little that was romantic or eccentric about it, should have dominated his time. Even if this portly country gentleman had sat hour 23

after hour at Wills's, as silent as Addison's description of himself as Mr. Spectator, it is perfectly intelligible. It is hardly too much to say that Dryden found the English speechless, and he gave them speech; and they accordingly acknowledged their master; the language which we can refine, enrich, distort or corrupt as we may, but which we cannot do without. No one, in the whole history of English literature, has dominated that literature so long, or so completely. And even in the nineteenth century the language was still the language of Dryden, as it is to-day. In two hundred odd years, or exactly three hundred years from his birth, hardly a word or a phrase has become quaint and obsolete. And yet the man who accomplished so much, and accomplished it so consciously, was content to do whatever came to hand; and for twenty years of his life occupied himself exclusively in order to make his living with a form of literature to which his talent was little suited, and that form too he transformed.

DRYDEN THE DRAMATIST

Dryden the Dramatist

IT is not such an easy matter to explain the utility to English letters and civilisation of Dryden's dramatic work, as it is to persuade of the importance of his poetry. Here are, in the edition of 1735 which I have, six volumes of miscellaneous plays, the chief product of twenty years of his life: it would be in a modern edition a fairly stout volume. The point is: are we to consider these plays as merely the by-product or waste-product of a man of genius, or as the brilliant effort to establish an impossible cause, or have they, perhaps, any important relation to the development of English literature? Would Dryden be as important as he is, would he have accomplished just as much as he did, if he had never written these plays at all; plays, one or two of which a small number of people to-day have had the opportunity of seeing on the stage, and three or four of which a rather larger number of people have read?

We begin, all of us, with every prejudice
John against Dryden's "heroic drama." There is one
Dryden great play in blank verse, *All for Love*, and the
difficulty about that is that Shakespeare's play
on the same subject, *Antony and Cleopatra*, is very
much greater—though not necessarily a much
finer play. There are several fine plays in rhymed
couplets, of which there is none better than *The*
Conquest of Granada, and the trouble with them
is that they are not in blank verse. It is extra-
ordinarily difficult not to apply to these plays
irrelevant standards of criticism, and standards,
moreover, which are not exactly of play-writing
or even of verse-making. We have always at the
back of our minds a comparison which is not
in kind. Most of us prefer the reading, not only
of Shakespeare, but of several other Elizabethan
dramatists to that of Dryden. And in our read-
ing of Elizabethan plays, we are inclined to con-
fer upon them the dramatic virtues of the most
actable (on the modern stage) of Shakespeare's
28 plays, because they have some of the *reading*

virtues of these and the rest of Shakespeare's plays. I shall not venture here to investigate the nature of the *dramatic* in poetic drama, as distinguishable from the *poetic* in poetic drama; only to point out that the problem is much more of a tangle than it looks. For instance, there is *that which expressed in word and action is effective on the stage without our having read the text before*: that might be called the *theatrically dramatic*; and there is also the "poetically dramatic," that which, when we read it, we recognize to have dramatic value, but which would not have dramatic value for us upon the stage unless we had already the perception of it from reading. *Theatrically* dramatic value in verse exists when the speech has its equivalent in, or can be projected by, the action and gesture and expression of the actor; *poetic* dramatic value is something dramatic in essence which can only be expressed by the word and by the reception of the word.

Shakespeare, of course, made the utmost use of each value; and therefore confuses us in our at-

*The
Dramatist*

tempt to estimate between the minor Elizabeth-
John ans and Dryden, for neither they nor Dryden
Dryden had such vast resources. But to make my point
a little clearer I will take parallel passages from
Antony and Cleopatra and from *All for Love*. In
the former play, when the soldiers burst in after
Cleopatra's death Charmian is made to say

It is well done, and fitting for a princess

Descended of so many royal kings.

Ah, soldier! (dies).

Dryden's Charmion says

Yes, 'tis well done, and like a Queen, the last

Of her great race. I follow her.

(Sinks down and dies).

Now, if you take these two passages by them-
selves, you cannot say that the two lines of Dry-
den are either less *poetic* than Shakespeare's, or
less *dramatic*; a great actress could make just as
much, I believe, of those of Dryden as of those
30 of Shakespeare. But consider Shakespeare's re-

markable addition to the original text of North,
the two plain words *ah, soldier*. You cannot say *The*
that there is anything peculiarly *poetic* about *Dramatist*
these two words, and if you isolate the dramatic
from the poetic, you cannot say that there is
anything peculiarly dramatic either, because
there is nothing in them for the actress to express
in action; she can at best enunciate them clearly.
I could not myself put into words the difference
I feel between the passage if these two words
ah, soldier were omitted and with them. But I
know there is a difference, and that only Shake-
speare could have made it.

One might say that Dryden was a great poet
who, by close application of a first rate mind,
made himself a great dramatist. His best plays
are a happy marriage, or a happy compromise,
between poetry and drama. You cannot say,
when he is at his best, that he is less dramatic
than Shakespeare, often he is more *purely* dra-
matic; nor can you say that he is less poetic. It
is merely that there is a flight above, at which 31

poetry and drama become one thing; of which
John one is often reminded in passages of Homer or
Dryden Dante. We often feel with Shakespeare, and now
and then with his lesser contemporaries, that the
dramatic action on the stage is the symbol and
shadow of some more serious action in a world
of feeling more real than ours, just as our per-
ceptions, in dreams, are often more ominously
weighted than they are in practical waking life.
As Chapman says

*That all things to be done, as here we live,
Are done before all times in the other life.*

Here again is a passage, from the dying words
of a hero of Chapman, which I will contrast
presently with words of a hero of Dryden.

*Here like a Roman statue I will stand
Till death hath made me marble; oh, my fame,
Live in despite of murder; take thy wings
And haste thee where the grey-eyed morn perfumes
Her rosy chariot with Sabæan spices,
32 Fly, where the evening from the Iberian vales*

*Takes on her swarthy shoulders Hecate
Crowned with a grove of oaks: fly where men feel The
The cunning axle-tree: and those that suffer Dramatist
Beneath the chariot of the snowy Bear:
And tell them all that D'Ambois now is hasting
To the eternal dwellers.*

Here is an equally well known purple passage
from *All for Love*.

*How I loved
Witness ye Days and nights, and all ye hours.
That danced away with down upon your feet,
As all your business were to count my passion.
One day passed by, and nothing saw but love,
Another came, and still 'twas only love,
The suns were wearied out with looking on,
And I untired with loving.
I saw you every day, and all the day;
And every day was still but as the first:
So eager was I still to see you more
While within your arms I lay,
The world fell mouldering from my hands each hour* 33

And left me scarce a grasp

John I knew not that I fled;

Dryden But fled to follow you.

—What haste she made to hoist her purple sails!

Now, you cannot say that one of these passages, that of Chapman or that of Dryden, is more purple than the other, or better poetry. Both are inferior in that each does to excess one part of what Shakespeare can do. Chapman departs too far from the direct stage action into the second world which the visual symbolises; Dryden is also excessively poetic, or rather too consciously poetic, by lavishing such fine poetry *solely* in the direct action. Chapman has only overtone; and Dryden has none. But if you consider the lines of Dryden solely as poetry, or solely as drama, you cannot find a flaw in them.

As for the verse of *All for Love* and the best of Dryden's blank verse in the other plays in which he used it, it is to me a miracle of revivification. I think that it has more influence than

it has had credit for; and that it is really the norm of blank verse for later blank verse playwrights. How Dryden could have escaped so completely the bad influence of the last followers of Shakespeare, with their dissolution of rhythm nearly into prose, and their wornout wardrobe of imagery, is as wonderful as his superiority to, and difference from the other schools of verse, that of the Senecal poets, and D'Avenant to whom he was somewhat indebted. I will hazard here an heretical and contestable opinion: that later blank verse dramatists have written better verse when they wrote more like Dryden, and worse blank verse when they were conscious of Shakespeare. When Shelley wrote in *The Cenci*

*The
Dramatist*

*My God! Can it be possible I have
To die so suddenly? So young to go
Under the obscure, cold, rotting, wormy ground!
To be nailed down into a narrow place;
To see no more sweet sunshine . . .*

I feel that this was not worth doing, because it
John is only a feeble echo of the tremendous speech
Dryden of Claudio in *Measure for Measure*; but Shelley
is not the only poet who has been Shakespear-
ean by the appropriation of worms and rot and
such Elizabethan stage properties. But other
lines, such as

*worse than despair,
Worse than the bitterness of death, is hope:
It is the only ill which can find place
Upon the giddy, sharp and narrow hour
Tottering beneath us*

are more, in their context, like Dryden—though
in *The Cenci* resemblances are confused by the
nature of the subject, which is more sympathetic
to Ford than to either Shakespeare or Dryden.
And much more obviously than in the play of
Shelley—which I have chosen for mention be-
cause it is obviously of Elizabethan model—
is the debt to Dryden present in the plays of
36 Byron.

The skill of Dryden's blank verse is all the more admirable when one admits that it is a tour de force: blank verse is not natural to him. We shall see that in one of his critical essays he presents a most able defence of the rhymed couplet in heroic drama; but I always feel that here Dryden founded his reasons for what he believed upon instinct. Just as he had to defend the heroic drama because it happened to be the only form possible for the time, so I suspect that he defended the rhymed couplet because it was the form of verse which came most natural to him. There is not a line in *All for Love* which has, to my ear, the conversational tone of the best of Dryden's satires. As he adapted himself to drama, so he had, as far as possible, to adapt the drama to himself. Not that he was the first or the last to rhyme on the stage. But there is no other poet to whom the couplet came so naturally as the vehicle of speech as it did to Dryden; what he did not do with it cannot be done; and his couplet, miraculously,

*The
Dramatist*

is speech. There are two reasons for the comparative success of his rhyming in drama: first, *John Dryden* he regularly relaxed the phrasing and made his lines run on as much as possible, so that they are technically different from his satire, and though still closely packed, less compressed; and of course he helps himself out with broken lines and triplets. The other reason is that he limits himself to those dramatic effects for which the rhymed couplet is adequate. Now the kind of play that he tried to write, and succeeded in writing, was a kind which would have been in existence, whether Dryden had written or not; and as it was there, it is wholly a merit on the part of Dryden to have written that kind of play in rhymed verse. The rhymed plays, such as *The Conquest of Granada* and *Aurung-Zebe*, would *not* have been such good plays as they are, had they been written in blank verse, even blank verse as good as Dryden's. So that Dryden himself, in defending rhyme in the drama, oversimplifies the problem: for as a

38

particular type of play modifies versification, so the play is in turn modified by the versification. *The*

No one still supposes that Dryden made his plays out of whole cloth on the French pattern. What there is in common, including the Spanish and Oriental themes, can be enumerated. But at the same time we do not always recognise how very different is the *ethos* of either Corneille or Racine from that of Dryden. The order of French tragedy sprang from an origin which has its parallel in the Senecal drama of the Countess of Pembroke's circle, the sort of play that Fulke Greville wrote. I do not think that Dryden's drama has any essential relation to that abortive movement. The great French tragedy is classical in the sense that it is strongly *moral*. Now Dryden's plays are emphatically not "moral" in this way; they are diversified, certainly, with fine, if not very profound, *moralising*, but that is not at all the same thing. The Elizabethan tragedy was not moral either, as the French was; but Shakespeare's work as a

Dramatist

39

whole, and some of the best plays of his contemporaries, explore the possibilities of human sin and suffering so profoundly as to give us something more than morals. But with Dryden I am afraid you get something less; he is a moralist only in speeches, not in plot; and the rest is a pageantry of humanity in heroic roles. And so I think that the true antecedent of Dryden is to be found in the plays of Beaumont and Fletcher. There is a similar exploitation of stage effect, the same dependence upon the strained situation for its immediate dramatic effectiveness. I cannot myself see any striking resemblance between the plays of Shakespeare's last period and the work of Beaumont and Fletcher; but the resemblance between *A King and No King* and *Don Sebastian* in their ethos is obvious. And if I am right in drawing this comparison, then it may be allowed that Dryden came at the right time, and that he did well to substitute for the enervated Jacobean blank verse of Fletcher his firm and masculine couplet.

We must call Dryden's plays "heroic drama" because we certainly can not call them tragedy. *The*
Even though he kills people off at the end, and *Dramatist*
though a dying queen raves in couplets better than one would conceive it possible for rhymed couplets to rave, what Dryden has is not the sense of tragedy at all. Indeed, it is from one point of view ironic to call these plays even "heroic"; for though he does not introduce the comic scene, some of his most effective passages are in a tone of witty satire, and are those in which the protagonists appear least heroic. For Dryden is an observer of human nature, rather than a creator.

I suspect that when Dryden regretted his efforts in comedy he was not merely deploring their licentiousness, which seems pretty innocent fun nowadays, but less consciously admitting their defects. Everything else that Dryden attempted, he brought to perfection in its kind, but in comedy he is a crude precursor of Congreve, and less admirable than Wycherley at his 41

best. His is the Restoration world, certainly,
John not that of the simple Elizabethan humours; but
Dryden his most polished figures of comedy, are, compared to the finest Restoration comedy, almost bumpkins; that delightful lady of *Marriage à la Mode*, Melantha, is still too “humorous” in her French affectations; and the fun of *Mr. Limberham* is not altogether well-bred. What I think is most noticeable, however, is that in his comedies Dryden was not able to bring his prose to perfection; it is a transition prose; and I doubt anyway whether his heart was in it. Dryden was quick enough to recognise the real right thing in prose dialogue; when young Mr. Congreve came along no one extolled him more highly than the older master of English letters. Congreve’s prose is truly what we ordinarily call poetic; at any rate, I believe that the only two dramatists who have ever attained perfect prose in comedy—meaning perfect prose *for* comedy, are Shakespeare and Congreve.

42 But Dryden was not *naturally* a dramatist,

as Shakespeare and Congreve were natural dramatists. His direct service to English drama is— *The*
apart from the value of his plays themselves— *Dramatist*
but here I am estimating the obligation of later times to Dryden, and not Dryden himself—his direct service is largely negative: had he not developed his own form of heroic play, which was suited to, and representative of his time, it is likely that a more and more etiolated Jacobeanism, with decayed versification, would have lingered on. His great service to the drama is merely incidental to his service to English letters.

We are apt to think, for convenience, and to forget that it is merely a convenience, of the development of prose and the development of verse as two parallel currents which never mingle. But Dryden's verse, for example, affects the history of English prose almost as much as his prose does. I have suggested that it is a bad sign when the written language and the spoken language drift too far apart. It is also bad when poetry and prose are too far apart; certainly, a poet 43

can learn essential knowledge from the study of
John the best prose, and a prose writer can learn from
Dryden the study of the best verse; for there are problems of expression common to both. But for Dryden's verse, we might not have had the perfection of Congreve's prose: though this is not demonstrable. Prose which has *nothing* in common with verse is dead; verse which has nothing in common with prose is probably artificial, false, diffuse, and syntactically weak. We commonly find versifiers who are prosaic, and prose writers who dress out their flat writing with withered flowers of poetic rhetoric, and this is just the opposite of what I have in mind. I do not believe that in any modern civilisation prose can flourish if all the verse being written is bad, or that good verse can be written in an atmosphere choked with bad prose. If I am right, the beneficent influence of Dryden's poetry cannot be confined to those poets his disciples, but is diffused over the whole of English thought and
44 expression.

I cannot, finally, pretend to demonstrate that Dryden had a beneficent influence on English tragic drama—but only for the reason that since Dryden there has been no English tragic drama to influence. I have tried to affirm a belief, at least, that Dryden's dramatic work has, besides the pleasure it can give us for its merits unique in English literature, importance in the following ways: first, I believe that it strengthened his command of his verse medium for other work, and enlarged his interests; then, because of its interest for his own time, and because of the importance of the theatre in his time, it helped to consolidate his influence upon his contemporaries and successors; it is an essential member of the body of his work, which must be taken as a whole; and lastly, because it gave him the knowledge and the opportunity for some of his best critical writing—which last, as I shall try to show, has been of enduring value.

*The
Dramatist*



DRYDEN THE CRITIC

Dryden the Critic

THE prose writings of Dryden, whether in the standard edition of W. P. Ker, or in the convenient "Everyman" edition, consist entirely of prefaces to various volumes of verse or of verse plays. For the most part, they are concerned either with his views on poetic drama, or with his views on the art of translation. They are occasional, and constitute a kind of commentary on what he was doing in verse; they are the notes of a practitioner. They are obviously important in two ways: in the history of the development of English prose style, and in the history of English criticism; they are of further importance to us here, in reckoning the importance of the whole work of Dryden; for they form a part of this whole work which cannot be neglected.

Dryden's Essays are first, important in the history of English prose. As I have said, Dryden's verse exercised the most vital influence on

English poetry for nearly a century; similarly,
John his prose had a temporary, and has a permanent,
Dryden value for English critical prose style; but the
great influence of Dryden cannot be divided
into two currents; his main influence was upon
the matter of thought and feeling out of which
both verse and prose are made; his own verse
and prose can therefore not be wholly separated,
though we may say that he probably influenced
prose by his verse still more than by his prose.
I mean, that if we consider him as a writer of
critical prose alone, we cannot say that his in-
fluence was dominant. We find similar tenden-
cies in style in other contemporary writers on
other subjects; and no one could go so far as to
maintain that but for Dryden, we should have
had neither the essays of Addison nor the writ-
ings of Swift at the point of perfection which
these two writers reached. One can more plau-
sibly conjecture, that but for the criticism of
Dryden, we might not have Addison's critical
50 essays on Milton or on the ballads; for Dryden

was positively the first master of English criticism; and he set a good example for critics by practising what he preached. *The Critic*

In Dryden's prose style, we find no such painful development as we find in his verse. His prose seems to spring spontaneously, perfectly modelled. There is nothing surprising about this; it would be surprising if Dryden had not written good prose. Anyone who has studied his poetry, from his crude beginnings to his perfect accomplishment, must be aware that Dryden was gradually acquiring those elements of good writing which are fundamental to both verse and prose, whilst he was freeing himself from the artificial poeticality of the previous age. His training in verse was training in prose as well; so that when, in maturity, he set himself, after the example of Corneille, to writing critical introductions to his own verse, his prose style is perfectly finished—indeed, larger and more supple than the prose style of Corneille himself. I have conceded that Dryden's prose 51

is only one of the prose styles of his time that
John went to the formation of our form of classic
Dryden English prose; but among these styles it is certainly one of the most admirable. He has all the virtues you would expect. He neither descends too low, nor attempts to fly too high; he is perfectly clear as to what he has to say; and he says it always with the right control and changes of intensity of feeling. His wit exceeds that of all his contemporaries; it contributes elegance and liveliness of figure, without ever overreaching itself into facetiousness. He has not the passion of his cousin Swift; but he everywhere convinces us of the serious, singleminded integrity of his love of truth in poetry, and his contempt for shams; and no writer in the next and more polished generation, not even Addison, has more urbanity. "Elegance" and "urbanity"; two words of commendation which have long been in disrepute; but which are always needed.

I know of no finer example of the precision
52 and also of the range of Dryden's prose style,

than the essay which we usually read first: the *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*. It may seem an absurd and unjust comparison, but I can think of no essay in dialogue form in English, which on its own plane—less sublime, less profound in thought—compares more favourably with some of the dialogues of Plato: it reminds me at the beginning particularly of the beautiful introduction to the *Theætetus*. “It was that memorable day, in the first summer of the late war, when our navy engaged the Dutch.” No one who has ever read it can forget the undertone of naval cannonading above which are raised the voices of Eugenius, Crites, Neander and Lisideius, as they discuss in their barge on the river the various practices of Greek, French and English drama, the merits of the several tragic writers, and the claims of blank and rhymed verse. And here, and in all his prose, Dryden is, as in his verse, in perfect training; there is nowhere an ounce of superfluous fat; he is neither anæmic nor apoplectic; every blow delivered has just the right force

*The
Critic*

behind it. When we read such memorable phrases

John as these from his essay *Examen Poeticum*:

Dryden

“The same parts and application which have made me a poet might have raised me to any honours of the gown, which are often given to men of as little learning and less honesty than myself. No Government has ever been, or ever can be, wherein time-servers and blockheads will not be uppermost. The persons are only changed, but the same jugglings in State, the same hypocrisy in religion, the same self-interest and mismanagement, will remain for ever. Blood and money will be lavished in all ages only for the preferment of new faces and old consciences.”

Who, reading such passages, cannot understand at once that they should be by the author of *Absalom and Achitophel*, and who could doubt that their author, had he set himself the task, might have been one of the greatest of political orators?

But to turn from the manner to the matter
54 of these prefaces, we observe first that they are

the first serious literary criticism in English by an English poet. We cannot quite say the first serious criticism, because there is for instance the contemporary criticism of Thomas Rymer—a critic of whom Dryden speaks highly, and of whom I should be tempted to speak more highly still. But Dryden was the first poet to theorise, on any large scale, about his own craft. I say on any large scale. There had been criticism in the previous age; but the only one I know, which has any precise and permanent value, is the admirable short treatise of Campion on metre and quantity—unless one except the reply to it by Daniel, and the graceful but ineffectual skirmishing of Philip Sidney. Dryden had, certainly, the example of the prefaces of Corneille in French, to which he was clearly indebted. But Dryden has proved a more important critic for the English language than was Corneille for the French. Rapin and Bossu, to whom Dryden refers, were more important in France than their colleagues in England; it is

*The
Critic*

possible that France has had too many critics
John of poetry who could not practise it, and Eng-
Dryden land too many poets who were not self-critical;
but in Dryden we have, considering his limita-
tion by his own time, an almost ideal balance
between the critic and the creative poet.

And as for his limitations of taste by his own
time—I should be glad if I could be sure that
I or any critic to-day was as catholic in taste,
or had such justification for his limitations. It
would seem nowadays a futile pastime, for in-
stance, to turn Chaucer into modern English.
But for Dryden's time it was no more futile
than it would be considered nowadays to para-
phrase such a thing as *Gawain and the Green
Knight*, or even Anglo-Saxon. For one point,
Chaucer was then a neglected and unappreciated
author; Dryden was not, any more than most
of his contemporaries, a scholarly student of
middle English; and it shows great perceptive-
ness on his part to have recognised Chaucer and
56 praised him as he did. Furthermore, Dryden

could not consider the English language, as we very foolishly and lazily are inclined to do, as finished and complete; he was in the thick of the struggle to modernise it. We must keep in mind this latter point, when we read his strictures upon the Elizabethans, and especially upon Shakespeare. Possibly, in retrospect, we are right in thinking that he somewhat exaggerates the worth of Fletcher, relative to Shakespeare. But take his comments upon Shakespeare one by one, and you will find, I believe, that most of them are just. We are so habituated to considering Shakespeare above criticism, that we cannot admit that Dryden's praise of Shakespeare is as high praise as our own; and that if we stop to apprehend the values which were rightly important for Dryden in his time, his occasional censure of Shakespeare is usually right.

It is natural that, with the French theory and practice in view, and with the imperfect knowledge of the Greek theatre, and of the meaning of Aristotle's comments upon it, current at the

time, Dryden should often have gone wrong in
John his dramatic criticism. Owing to thus abusing
Dryden the sense of Aristotle's *Poetics*, many men have
erred in trying to erect a final theory of what
the theatre ought to be and must be from what
it has been. We must not look to Dryden's the-
ories for the genesis of Dryden's practice in the
theatre; rather, we find a theory which is a com-
promise between Aristotle, as he understood Ar-
istotle through distorting French lenses, and his
own practice which is itself a compromise be-
tween earlier English practice and French prac-
tice. Much, for which he appeals to authority,
is merely, in his own practice, the result of a
sense of form and order working against the
disorderliness of the Elizabethan stage. And it
must be admitted that the Elizabethans neglect-
ed certain very positive dramatic virtues. We
are accustomed, and rightly, to look to Shake-
speare for more than dramatic virtues, for a
"pattern" of feeling that Dryden could not see,
58 because Dryden was not looking for it but for

something else; and therefore some of Dryden's criticisms of Shakespeare's later plays appear to us supercilious and shallow. But Shakespeare could play his own mighty music upon any instruments that came to hand; and he was not concerned, consciously, greatly to alter the form which he found ready. But Dryden's common sense, and sense of order, were imperative to him; and we must take his theory largely as a kind of legal justification for what he felt was right. *The Critic*

Dryden first, following the French, misunderstands the Aristotelian theory of the Unities of Time and Place; and then, disapproving of the French strictness (he is a good patriot, and never fails to speak up for English drama against French when the occasion offers), proceeds to qualify it. For instance, he reprehends the attempt to condense the history of twenty-four years into a representation of three hours (one would like to read his critique of *Back to Methuselah*), but approves the representation of 59

twenty-four hours in the same space. What is
John true is, I think, in practice, that more *unity of*
Dryden *poetic feeling* (which is the only unity that mat-
ters) can be obtained *as a rule*, with a minimum
of difference between times and places. I say
as a rule, for some actions obviously cannot be
represented at all without making great leaps
of time or space. Dryden's view, as it stands,
is literally absurd; for it would make *Coriolanus*
a better play than *Antony and Cleopatra*, solely
for the reason that the distance from Rome
to Antium is shorter than that from Rome to
Egypt. But the rigidity of Dryden's theory
must not blind us to the accuracy of Dryden's
common sense.

Here and there Dryden goes wrong in ways
which it is less easy to pardon. For instance,
he speaks of the comic element in Elizabethan
tragedy as being employed for what we call
"comic relief." No doubt, from the point of
view of dramatic effect, this comic element was,
60 for the great majority of the Elizabethan au-

dience, comic *relief*. "Laughter and tears" are still advertised as attractions to some film or other; and doubtless the Elizabethans liked to sandwich their laughter and tears as much as modern audiences do. But a very little examination of Elizabethan drama, and especially of Shakespeare, will convince us that the comic is not really "relief" at all, but on the contrary, at its best an intensification of the sombreness. The Porter in *Macbeth*, the Gravedigger in *Hamlet*, the Fool in *Lear*, the drunkenness of Lepidus in *Antony and Cleopatra*—there is no "relief" in these; they merely make the horror or tragedy more real by transposing it for a moment from the sublime to the common. But we were wrong if we expected Dryden to perceive this; for it is just the sort of thing he would not have perceived. *The Critic*

Dryden was not only the first great English poet to set down carefully his theories about the practice of his own art, but he is also, allowing for the limitations of his age, what we may

call the *normal* critic. Johnson, in his *Lives of John the Poets*, adopts a more particular method; his *Dryden* general views of the nature of poetry, and regulations of the art, occur here and there during the course of biographical critiques of particular poets; Dryden is directly concerned with the proper art of poetry, and his remarks on particular poets occur only as illustrations. Coleridge, in his great disorderly book of criticism, is no safe model for other reasons than mere disorder, for he does not restrain himself to criticism, but runs into philosophy and æsthetics. Wordsworth is occupied, in his fine prefaces to the *Lyrical Ballads* with defending his own practices, and is not accordingly a model for normal criticisms of poetry; and Matthew Arnold is too largely concerned with finding the moral lesson. Dryden is concerned neither with appreciation nor with æsthetics. He was fortunate in his age, when philosophical writing was practised in England with a language which

62 had just been developed to the point of express-

ing adequately abstract ideas, and before writing about poetry had come to mean philosophising about it. It is also fortunate for us to have had a critic who wrote so well and with such authority about poetry, at a time when neither the fundamental nature of the poetic activity nor the social function of poetry was yet considered the subject matter of literary criticism. As testimony of the clarity of Dryden's expression and the just sobriety of his theory, I mention an essay called *The Proper Wit of Poetry*, and particularly the third paragraph, in which he defines Wit. It will be observed that it does not occur to Dryden to distinguish to the point of isolation the reasoning from the imaginative faculty; it would not have occurred to him that there was or should be anything *irrational* in poetic imagination. He says:

“The first happiness of the poet’s imagination is properly invention, or finding of the thought; the second is fancy, or the variation, deriving or mould-

*The
Critic*

*ing of that thought, as the judgment represents it
John proper to the subject; the third is elocution, or the
Dryden art of clothing and adorning that thought so found
and varied in apt, significant and sounding words:
the quickness of the imagination is seen in the in-
vention, the fertility in the fancy and the accuracy
in the expression.”*

The distinction between thought and image, and the distinction between the thought and the clothing of it in elocution, are foreign to modern theory of poetry; but I think that these distinctions are safer than many that more recent writers have made; and the part of inspiration (or free association) and the part of conscious labour are justly kept in place.

A great merit of Dryden as a critic and as a critical influence is that he never transgresses the line beyond which the criticisms of poetry become something else. In that happy age it did not occur to him to enquire what poetry was
64 *for*, how it affected the nerves of listeners, how

it sublimated the wishes of the poet, whom it should satisfy, and all the other questions which really have nothing to do with poetry as poetry; and the poet was not expected to be either a sibyl or a prophet. The purpose of poetry and drama was to *amuse*; but it was to amuse properly; and the larger forms of poetry should have a moral significance; by exhibiting the thoughts and passions of man through lively image and melodious verse, to edify and to refine the reader and auditor. *The Critic*

I do not know that we have improved upon this conception of the place and function of poetry. I do not pretend that Dryden as a critic is often profound, any more than I make that claim for him as a poet; but the more I consider contemporary reflexion upon poetry, the more thankful I am for what we may call Dryden's critical orthodoxy. In his opinions there is no extravagance. Now it seems to me that there is a very widespread tendency, which takes various forms nowadays, to treat poetry as a kind of 65

religion or substitute for religion. The germ, or
John something more developed than the germ, of
Dryden this way of thinking is to be found in the criticism of Matthew Arnold, who is to that extent an heresiarch. Arnold dismisses altogether the intellectual element in religion, and leaves only art and morals; art, and particularly literary art, inculcates morals, and truly moral art is all that Arnold leaves us in the place of religious faith. It is only a short step, if any step be necessary, to finding in literature the satisfaction which we deny ourselves in religion. This new confusion takes several forms. I find it in the humanism of Irving Babbitt, and in the more recent theories of critics of such opposed views as Middleton Murry and I. A. Richards. Mr. Murry seems to maintain that poetry *is* religion; Mr. Richards rather more moderately that poetry is the best thing we can have nowadays instead of religion. I am not concerned to criticise such theories from a theological point of view; for indeed
66 they fall beyond the reach of such criticism; I

am anxious rather lest they distort our enjoyment of poetry. The poet tends to be appointed, *The Critic* not indeed a priest of his own cult, for he is not allowed to interpret himself; but rather a Grand Llama imprisoned in princely privacy while the critical priests carry on the real business. A dead poet for this purpose is better than a living one, as he cannot be so indiscreet as to speak for himself. But criticism itself will be biassed, according to the particular oracles we consult; and as some critics will find their religion in some poetry and others in others, the judgment of poetry as poetry will become of dwindling interest.

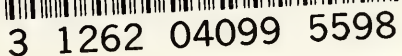
Dryden, then, both as poet and as critic, seems to me a very great defender of sanity. I do not think that I have made any extravagant claims for him. For that matter, I have not said much that is original. Dryden is no discovery; there are few of his merits as a writer that have not been discovered and brought to light by one or another earlier critic. I have no desire to see his

works on every drawing room table, or even to
John see a generation of versifiers employ their talent
Dryden upon political satire and theological controversy. I do not suppose that at any time he will ever be anyone's favourite poet, or engross the adolescent mind for a season as the romantic poets can do. I have purposely avoided trying to give a course in "How to Enjoy Dryden," because the people who can really enjoy his poetry need no assistance from me or from anyone. But it is worth while to know what Dryden did for the English language in verse and in prose, because we shall understand better what the language is, and of what it is still capable.

Date Due

[illegible]

C. 2



DUE	RETURNED	DUE	RETURNED
